

***Notes from Larry Van Daele's presentation to Montana Governor's Task Force for grizzly bear management – 09 April 2020***

**WHERE:**

Alaska is a huge state with vast natural resources. It is the farthest north, west and east state in the country, has the highest peak, the most lakes and glaciers, and the longest coastline. We also have the lowest human population of any state. Below is a comparison with Montana:

	Montana	Alaska
Area	147,000 square miles	663,000 square miles
Human population	1,070,000 people	730,000 people
Grizzly population	2,000 bears	30-40,000 bears
Humans/Grizzly	535 people/bear	18 people/bear
Square miles/Grizzly	1 bear per 74 square miles	1 bear per 17 square miles

Comparing one of Montana's densest grizzly bear populations to one of Alaska's, we can see that there is about a 10-fold difference:

- Greater Yellowstone Ecosystem: 9,200 square miles/700 bears = 13 square miles per bear
- Kodiak Archipelago: 5,000 square miles/4,000 bears = 1.3 square miles per bear

Alaska has robust brown/grizzly bear populations that inhabit all portions of the state except for some islands in Southeast Alaska and in the outer Aleutian Chain. With few exceptions, brown/grizzly bear habitats, including salmon and large ungulates populations, are healthy and intact. Even Anchorage, our largest city, has a healthy brown/grizzly bear population.

**WHO:**

All resident wildlife species in the state are managed by the Alaska Department of Fish and Game (ADF&G) and regulated by the Alaska Board of Game (with a few special exceptions). For management purposes, the state is divided into 26 Game Management Units, many of which are further divided into subunits. Land managers such as the Federal Government (NPS, USFWS, USFS, BLM) and Native Corporations can be more restrictive on their lands, but do not set their own seasons or bag limits. We do not have any Indian Reservations in Alaska.

**WHAT:**

We typically refer to coastal brown/grizzly bears as "brown bears". They have access to salmon throughout the summer as well as other coastal resources such as clams, sedges, ungulates, berries and dead marine mammals. Because of the plethora of food, these bears are usually quite large, population densities are higher, and they are generally more tolerant of other bears and people.

Bears in the rest of the state are referred to as "grizzlies". These bears are more akin to the bears in Montana in size, demeanor, population densities and food habits.

Due to the diversity of habitats, bear behaviors and densities, human population dynamics, predator prey relationships, and access across our state, we have devised a complex and fluid regulatory and management program to conserve brown/grizzly bears. In addition to hunting regulations, we also maintain bear sanctuaries primarily for bear viewing, and an active education program to help people

live with bears. We allow people to kill bears to defend their life or property (in certain situations) and we do NOT have a compensation program for damage caused by bears to property or livestock.

### **WHY:**

Our State Constitution directs us to manage all wildlife species for “sustained yield” for “the maximum benefit of the people”. State statutes further direct us to manage moose, caribou and deer populations for consumptive human uses and authorizes the use of predator management programs to bolster those ungulate populations if necessary. The reason for these statutes is to protect “food security” in the state because we do not have much opportunity for raising domestic livestock and many of our residents rely on wild game for food.

Predator management programs are limited in scope and duration and often include wolf, black bear and brown/grizzly bear reduction efforts. The first step in most predator management programs is to liberalize hunting and trapping seasons so that the public has an opportunity to utilize the resources instead of expending agency funds to reduce predator populations. These programs are both popular and controversial, and are predicated on the best scientific evidence we can gather. Over the years we have found that bear control is usually less effective than wolf control. In no cases are we authorized to exterminate predator populations from an area.

One of the main questions I was asked to address is why should brown/grizzly bear hunting be allowed. Here are some reasons:

**Food and clothing** – subsistence in Alaska – many of our residents still rely on wild resources including bears

**Spiritual and ceremonial** – can include the utilitarian concept that resources are put here to use, or as a special way to commune with a special animal, especially with indigenous cultures

**Bear population management** – increase/decrease survival and productivity of the population, inhibit expansion, alter bear behavior

**Predator control** – increase calf and adult survival for wild ungulate populations

**Human, livestock, and crop safety** – hunts targeted at specific “problem” bears or liberal hunting regulations around some areas

**Tradition (both Native and non-native)** – from the passing of contemporary intergenerational traditions, to revitalizing traditions of mountain men or shamans

**Recreation** – getting out to enjoy the outdoors and better understand nature

**Economic opportunity** – guide/outfitters, land owners, taxidermists, agencies, hunters selling bear parts

**Trophy and bragging rights** – sharing a unique opportunity through stories, images and taxidermy mounts

### **WHEN:**

A quick look at the history of brown/grizzly management in Alaska can be summarized (and greatly generalized) as follows:

- Pre-contact (before mid-1700s) – meat and pelts were for subsistence and traditional practices
- Russian, British and American fur traders (mid 1700s-early 1900s)– bears killed and hides sold
- Territorial days (early to mid-1900s) - statewide predator control (poison and aerial shooting)
- Early statehood (1959-1990s)– research & conservative regulations to rebuild bear populations
- Current day - Area-specific management programs, science and human-society based

**HOW:**

As noted earlier, Alaska is diverse so when it comes to brown/grizzly bear management, and a one-size-fits-all approach will not work. Area specific management programs depend on management objectives, accessibility, bear density within and adjacent to area, as well as public opinion.

Here are some of the regulatory tools we use to manage brown/grizzly bear hunting and hunters:

- **Harvest metrics** – age of harvest, sex ratio, days hunted, hunter success, harvest chronology, percent of estimated population – collected by ADF&G from all hunts
- **General season, registration permit, drawing permit** – different ways to monitor harvest and hunter effort. *General season* requires no special paperwork, *Registration hunts* offer unlimited permits but they must be picked up from ADF&G prior to hunt and reporting is mandatory, *Drawing hunts* are lotteries with very limited permits available – application fees and harvest reporting required
- **Season lengths** – vary from a few weeks to year-round depending on management objectives, access and bear population density
- **Hide/skull must be salvaged and sealed** – statewide except for special subsistence hunts
- **Meat salvage and no sealing unless hide/skull leaves local area** – subsistence hunts only
- **One bear/four years** – primarily coastal brown bears, trophy management (used to be statewide)
- **One bear each year** – interior grizzlies, less access, more predatory bears
- **Two bears each year (selling hides, skulls and claws)** – even less access, economic opportunity for remote villages, predator control
- **Cubs and sows with cubs protected** (first and second years of life) – statewide (rare exceptions for limited predator control actions)
- **Resident bear tag** – one of the only species residents have to get a special tag (\$25), used to be statewide but has been rescinded for most interior grizzly hunts within last 15 years
- **Non-resident (US states other than Alaska) and Alien (countries other than USA) tag fees and guide requirement** – NR tag fee \$1,000, Alien tag fee \$1,300, all guides, outfitters and transporters licensed and regulated by the Alaska Big Game Commercial Services Board
- **No same-day-airborne, radio communication, dogs, artificial lights, herding or chasing, denning, rimfire cartridges, or poisons** – statewide
- **Baiting only in limited situations** – only at licensed bait stations, special regulations apply
- **Trapping in certain areas** – very rarely used and only in closely regulated predator control programs

**SUMMARY**

Alaska is a large and diverse state with a healthy population of brown/grizzly bears and intact ecosystems. Bear hunting is a sustainable and integral part of our wildlife conservation program and has evolved into diverse management paradigms to match local and statewide goals and objectives. We have found that by engaging the public and using the best scientific information possible we can incorporate both consumptive and “non-consumptive” human uses of bears and co-exist with this species.

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